

Post-modernistic Elements in the Writings of Kamala Das

Vivekanand Rao

Assistant Professor

National College of Law Barhalganj
Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh

Introduction

The history of Indian Writing in English began with the works of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio and Michael Madhusudan Dutt followed by Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao contributed to the growth and popularity of Indian English fiction in the 1930s. It is also associated, in some cases, with the works of members of the Indian diaspora who subsequently compose works in English language.

Postmodern Indian Poetry in English is one of the many “new literatures” which began to emerge after 1980s. Important poets, include the names of Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra, Kamala Das, Shiv K. Kumar, Keki N. Daruwalla, Dom Moraes, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Raj Kamal Jha, Ruskin Bond, Manoj Das, Hari Kunzru, and a few others. Kamala Das is the second important Indian English poet to appear on the poetic scene after Ezekiel with the publication of her book of verse, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), in the post-colonial era. She is also the fourth Indian English poet to win the Sahitya Akademi Award for her book, *Collected Poems Vol. I* in 1985. She has published two volumes of poems – *Collected Poems Vol. I* (1984) and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996) – in the post-1980 era. It is the great trio of well-known writers – Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao who wrote novels and stories in the nineteen thirties that started a new era, and Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, and A.K. Ramanujan who wrote poetry in the sixties, have greatly

contributed to the creation of a new literature in English in India that encourages the coming generations. As we know Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* marks postmodernism in Indian English fiction and the works of the poets like Kamala Das can be said to embody the characteristics of postmodernism and post-colonialism in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Kamala Das was one of the bold contemporary postmodern Indian women writers. She has made enormous contribution for the growth of Indian poetry in English. She was an Indian English poet and writer and also a leading Malayalam author from Kerala. Das began writing at age fourteen and had her first poem was published by P.E.N. India. Both in subject matter and in style, Kamala Das' poetry shows originality and reveals the real picture of Indian sensibility. In nutshell, her poetry contributes substantially to the creation of an Indian English idiom that helps us to distinguish Indian English poetry from poetry written in English anywhere in the world. The major theme of most of her poems are the quest for love and her failure to find fulfilment of love in life as T S Eliot talks in *Love song of J Alfred Prufrock*. Kamala Das is a confessional poet who displays feminist ethos in her poems and it shows postmodern elements. Her poems are the outcome of her intensely felt personal experience which she expresses honestly and with great conviction.

Postmodern Themes & Elements in Her Poetry:

Kamala Das was one of the bold contemporary postmodern Indian women writers. She has made enormous contribution for the growth of Indian poetry in English. The original name of Kamala Das is Kamala Surayya. She was an Indian English poet and writer and also a leading Malayalam author from Kerala. Das began writing at age fourteen and had her first poem was published by P.E.N. India. She has authored many autobiographical works and novel, several well- received collections of poetry in English, numerous volumes of short stories. She was one of the first Indian writers to explore sexual themes in her work. She has written many collections of poems such

as “*Summer in Calcutta*”, “*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*”, “*The Descendants*”, Etc. through her poems she has tried to emphasize the feminine identity and personal identity in a male dominated society that is prominent issue in postmodern India. Her poems are revolt, and the revolt is the outcome of all her dissatisfaction and psychological traumas. The major theme of most of her poems are the quest for love and her failure to find fulfilment of love in life.

Kamala Das is a confessional poet who displays feminist ethos of postmodern issue in her poems. Her poems are the outcome of her intensely felt personal experience which she expresses honestly and with great conviction. According to Kamala Das, childhood and memory are the chief source of her poetry. She has often compared with such modern confessional poets as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Das speaks of her failure in love or need for love. She expresses her experiences and passions with an openness and frankness unusual in the Indian context.

The note of profound anguish in Das’s poetry issues from her experience of alienation from early childhood. In her autobiography *My Story* she reveals the alienated from her father of patriarchy and from her mother who always lays on bed and writes poems. The parents did not spend time with them. She experiences alienation from teachers and classmates in school. She depicts herself and her brother as a children of loveless parents in her autobiography.

There is a free flow of colloquial idioms in her Poetry and words as it were, obey her call.

I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one. Don’t write in English,
they said,
English is not your mother- tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,

Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it
Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is
Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and is aware.

(Introduction: The Old Playhouse and Other Poems)

Kamala Das poetry is based on personal expedience. *My Grandmother's House* Poem is a poem based on personal expedience.

There is house now far away where once
I received love That woman died,
The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved
Among books, I was too young
To read, and my blood turned cold like the moon."

(My Grandmother's House 1 to 5)

The imagery in *My Grandmother's House* is personal and brings out the importance of unconditional love from the one that she loves. She received love from her grandmother without giving anything in return in childhood. It is the type of love which has no bounds and is unchanging. However, the love that she received vanished along with her grandmother's last breath.

Behind my bed room door like a brooding
Dog... you cannot believe, darling,
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved... I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers' doors to

In *Love*, she expresses her happiness and contentment in love. She gives us brief account of sexual experience which created a kind of dilemma for her. She expresses her difficulty in relating to a man who had made love to her in a rough manner. She describes that in his relationship with her, there had been no room, no excuse, and no need for love, and that every embrace between them had been like a finished jigsaw which is complicated.

She faced problem of identity since childhood that shows the postmodern element in her works. Kamala Das was one of the most prominent feminist voices in the postcolonial era. She wrote in her mother tongue Malayalam as well as in English. To her Malayalam readers she was MadhaviKutty and to her English patrons she was Kamala Das. On account of her extensive contribution to the poetry in our country, she earned the label '*The Mother of Modern Indian English Poetry*'. She has also been likened to literary greats like Sylvia Plath because of the confessional style of her writing. On the occasion of her birth anniversary, we look into the remarkable life of this literary icon.

Das published six volumes of poetry between 1965 and 1985. Drawing upon religious and domestic imagery to explore a sense of identity, Das tells of intensely personal experiences, including her growth into womanhood, her unsuccessful quest for love in and outside of marriage. She lends a new dimension to her love poetry by revealing her kinship with an anterior Indian tradition which has its roots in Indian epics.

She searches for love is the sole preoccupation of her poetry that is the crux of the subject matter. Das earned fame as the "voice of women's sexuality". As a poet strongly

committed to the sexual world, Kamala Suraiyya (Das) always tried to identify love with physical emptiness. To her, this identification was an attempt to redefine her own identity and sustain a meaningful relationship. It was her suffering that led her to seek place in another's arm to knock at another's door-"...yearned for a man from/another town", as she writes in *The Wild Bougainvillea*. Das once she said in an interview to the *Warrior*, "I always wanted love, and if you don't get it within your home, you stray a little". Kamala Das lived alone in her world with feelings of loneliness. Her first collection of poems, entitled *The Sirens*, appeared in 1964 and won her the Asian Poetry Prize. At the age of fifteen she was married to Mr. M. Das. Mr. Das devoted all his time to the office-work. She writes for her husband: "My husband was immersed in his office-work, and after work there was the dinner, followed by sex. Where was there any time left for him to want to see or the dark buffaloes of the slopes.

She says the sense of physical warmth and well – being is placed against the bitter cold of winter winds in the poem *Winter*. In *Relationship* she identifies her with physical desire. The sterile sting of rejection and deception is juxtaposed with 'my body's wisdom' which tells that the poet would find rest and peace in her lover's arms though he might betray her. Here love is older than the lover by myriad saddened centuries. Her desire makes the lover beautiful. It originates in the primordial instincts of the lovers. The theme of lust is apotheosized in *Convicts* a poem in which sensual love is portrayed in terms of physical labor and heat. The convicts are the lovers and their lust is universal. The comparison of the lovers with toys dead children leave behind implies the fatal nature of lust. The lovers have lost their separate genders in the heat and heaviness of lust. The effacement of individual personalities in the clout of lust takes the perceptibly hard shape of a metaphysical conceit.

Her upbringing by careless parents, marriage to an egoistic and vainglorious man, disappointment in love, and illicit love -affairs with other men in order to remove her boredom and anxiety, rendered her vision tragic. She believes that marriage means

endless sacrifices, household chores, loss of freedom and frustration. This is clearly depicted by Das in "*The Old Playhouse*":

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but
Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
Pathways of the sky" (1-5)

She describes in this poem that her life is like a gloomy playhouse. The poet says that her husband treat her cruelly. Poem is a vehement protest against the male domination and superiority which completely belittles a woman's personality. As an expression of feminine sensibility and protest against male supremacy.

At last, there are the poems of Kamala Das's written in last phase. Ghanashyam and other poems too. All these poems round the divine person of Krishna with whom Radha had fallen deeply in love. In these poems Kamala Das has tried to transform her lust into love and to exalt and glorify that love by dedicating herself to Ghanashyam or Lord Krishna. In other words, Kamala Das has outgrown her lust and has risen above the demands of her body because she came to know the real and true love, thus imparting a spiritual quality to her love. We may regard these poems as representing her spiritual evolution, and as expressing her devotion to Lord Krishna.

Conclusion

Thus postmodern elements are filled in her poetry whereas Search for love and alienation are central to the poetry of Kamala Das. Her poems are all self-experienced poem. Das presents herself as being able to use writing as a way to communicate her own confessional need. She writes chiefly of love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish. Indian reader responded sympathetically to her guiltiness and frankness with regard to sexual matter. Her poems are quest for true love that has ended in frustration

and discontentment. Her poetry reflects her own self with a powerful force of protest against the male dominated society. Her poems show her failure in love and the voice of the victimized women of the world. According to her love must lead to self-realization and self-growth. It is called pure love when it satisfies her romantic aspiration and emotional need. Her feminine sensibility finds its true and fullest expression in her love poems. Indian sensibility is transparent in her poetry and the use of Radha Krishna myth makes it more appealing to the Indian readers; so, the use of national myth helps to create an identity for the poet. Kamala Das's collections appeared at a time when English poetry by Indian women had moved on from such colonial and nationalist themes as the rewriting of legends, praise of peasants, and from general ethical statements to writing about personal experiences. In the poetry of Kamala Das, the directness of speech rhythms and colloquial language is an expression of emotional involvement. Das offers a range of highly volatile emotions with poems unexpectedly, changing direction and gaining effect from their inner contrasts, conflicts, ironies and extremes.

References:

Das, Kamala. *My Story*. New Delhi: Harper Collins Publisher, 2004. Print. "Das, Kamala. Poems."

Narasimhaiah, C. D. *An Anthology of Commonwealth Poetry*. New Delhi: Macmillan, 2004. Print

A feminist reading of Kamala Das's poetry. Prof. K. V. Dominic. Web. 20 Mar. 2000.

Confessional mode in poetry of Kamala Das. Web. 25 Aug. 2013.

<https://ashvamegh.net/theme-of-love-in-poems-of-kamala-das>